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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0360
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID PRIORITY 1903
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0693
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN PRIORITY 0384
RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE PRIORITY
RHMFISS/COMSOCEUR VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
RUEHDS/USMISSION USAU ADDIS ABABA PRIORITY
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 0426
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000722

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SUBJECT: THE FNDD'S TAWASSOUL PARTY: STILL CONFIDENT OF VICTORY

REF: NOUAKCHOTT 707

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Dennis Hankins for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Members of the moderate Islamist party Tawassoul expressed strong anti-coup sentiments and faith that their efforts to fight the military regime would eventually lead to its downfall. They rejected accusations by the High State Council (military junta) that they are "extremists." They called on the United States to use its international prestige and clout to lean on the Europeans and Chinese, and were disappointed by U.S. presence at the Mauritanian National Day ceremony at the Presidential Palace.
End summary.

12. (C) PolAsst met Tawassoul party members in charge of external relations Saleck Ould Mohamed Moussa, Dr. Amar Ould Mohamed Najem, and Dr. Aminetou Mint Etchagha El Mokhtar December 4 at party headquarters. Tawassoul, a moderate Islamic party, currently holds the rotating presidency of the anti-coup FNDD (National Front for the Defense of Democracy), and has been a vocal opponent of General Aziz and the High State Council.

13. (C) A fragile democracy: El Mokhtar began by stating that Mauritania had a fragile democratic system under President Abdallahi, but it was democracy nonetheless, in contrast to the artificial "African-style democracy" under President Taya. Despite their knowledge that Abdallahi was the military's preferred candidate, Tawassoul accepted his election because of the free and transparent elections, and because they hoped his election would lead to lasting democracy in the country. Their hopes were bolstered when Abdallahi legalized Islamist political parties for the first time in Mauritania's history. Becoming visibly emotional, El Mokhtar said, "I began to experience true liberty for the first time in my life, and it is hard to let go of it."

14. (C) Sharp critique of the regime: Turning to the current situation, El Mokhtar and Najem condemned military leaders as too involved in politics and too busy "manipulating deputies" to do their real job of protecting the country. Citing the terrorist attacks where several Mauritanian soldiers were killed, Najem noted the military "cannot even defend our own borders," much less run the country. El Mokhtar mentioned recent price drops undertaken by the junta, noting that such economic populism was unsustainable and a "mistake." Najem

criticized the hypocrisy of the junta's promises to root out corruption and mismanagement, stating "the ones over there" (nodding towards the Presidential Palace) were the worst offenders.

15. (C) Charges of extremism: Responding to the accusations of the High State Council and others that Tawassoul was connected to or composed of Islamic extremists, El Mokhtar said it was a lack of democracy and justice that creates extremism and the need to work in secret. "When you can express yourself freely, there is no need to work in secret," El Mokhtar said. Despite Taya's fierce suppression of Islamists, they struggled peacefully to express themselves. "We are Islamists, true, but we are moderate Islamists," Najem added. Holding no illusions about their own situation under the military junta, Najem said, "We will be the first victims" if the coup is allowed to succeed.

16. (C) Working with others: Najem described the anti-coup FNDD coalition as "well-organized" and having been a positive experience. Conceding that compromises were sometimes necessary given the disparate groups comprising the FNDD, Najem nevertheless said he was optimistic and that it was "only a matter of time" until they triumphed and restored democratic order. Note: On December 3 the anti-coup forces broadened their umbrella, adding labor unions, NGOs, and civil society organizations to their coalition and branding it the "Coordination of Democratic Forces." It is expected this broadened coalition will allow for better-coordinated and larger protest marches in the future, comprising numerous anti-coup groups. The FNDD will continue to be the political

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face of the anti-coup movement. End note.

17. (C) Torture allegations by Amnesty International: Asked for a reaction to the December 3 Amnesty International report that described widespread abuse and torture by Mauritanian security forces, El Mokhtar and Najem acknowledged torture was thought to be common, having heard rumors of broken arms and similar mistreatment of prisoners. El Mokhtar went on to say, "I've seen it (torture) with my own eyes" during peaceful demonstrations against the coup, when marchers were hit by police, beat with truncheons, and tear-gassed.

18. (C) The way forward: When asked for a solution to the present crisis, all three party members were unanimous: the return of legitimacy and constitutional order. After that has occurred, they would be ready to accept the results of any election, stressing the election must come "after President Abdallahi completes his mandate." They stressed that the country cannot develop without democracy. If the military succeeds in installing itself in government institutions, things will only get worse, and lead to a series of coups in Africa. El Mokhtar said Abdallahi was in office for 15 months, but Aziz wanted to "stay in power for 15 years." She also said that the international community must continue to apply pressure on the junta to make them relinquish power.

19. (C) U.S. presence at National Day ceremony: Najem expressed disappointment that the USG sent a representative to the Mauritanian National Day ceremony at the Presidential Palace on November 28, saying the junta was using U.S. attendance to try to claim some sort of legitimacy. (Note: Most press and media were unaware that the USG even attended the ceremony, so it is unclear how widespread knowledge of U.S. attendance was. End note.) PolAsst said that the USG wanted to express solidarity with the Mauritanian people, not confer legitimacy on the junta, and noted that neither the Ambassador nor Charge were present. PolAsst further explained that the regime had changed the traditional order of events for the flag ceremony, thereby compelling the assembled diplomats to shake Aziz's hand before the flag was raised (Reftel).

¶10. (C) USG must use its influence: Moussa, the most senior party member present, arrived late and missed most of the discussion. However, he thanked the USG for its firm position against the coup. Unprompted, he praised the recent U.S. elections, saying it was "an example for Africa." He went on to say that the USG must use its privileged position with President Sarkozy, who has also taken a firm anti-coup stance, to maintain pressure on the Europeans, whom he saw as the potential weak link among the international community. Singling out China, which was "only looking out for its own commercial interests," he said the USG must hold discussions at the highest levels to "neutralize" them and their support for dictators.

¶11. (C) Comment: The Tawassoul party has been one of the strongest political opponents of the coup, and probably the most vocal political party within the FNDD. In contrast to many other Mauritanian politicians and their "nomadic" tendencies, Tawassoul members appear to hold strong principled stands, rooted in Islamic ideals. Having suffered repression under President Taya, the members of Tawassoul are not keen to see their gains made under Abdallahi erased. They appear committed to fighting the coup for the long haul and to restoring constitutional legitimacy. End comment.

HANKINS